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ARRIVAL ★ DEPARTURE

The barman stood with his back facing his customers, blocking me from their gazes. His hand clutched a glass of liquor, and he set it down with a smile.

“One glass of gin,” he said normally. Then his voice dropped into a whisper. “Missus Lily will be expecting you in five minutes. I will cover.” And he was off.

I nodded slightly and took a sip off the liquor, only to realize it was just water. Maybe the headmistress didn’t want me to get drunk the first day here. After all, the instructions that she gave me was a bit... concealing.

Arrive at nineteen at Barter’s inn; upper-right corner, and order a glass of gin. That was what was said.

I glanced around. Compared to the bar’s handful of guests, its atmosphere was by no means empty. A group of workers sat at my opposite corner, each waving their glass of bright yellow beer as chatter and laughter filled the air. The barman was exchanging words with two men in official attire. People were buzzing through the bar windows on their way home. It was almost nineteen hours, the sky already dark, street lights replacing the sun as light providers, dinner tables being set up by mothers and children, awaiting their beloved husbands and fathers.

Perhaps I could be counted as a flaw in this big picture. A young girl sitting alone in a cozy inn at this hour would probably be unsuitable here.

I heard a rattle, and next moment the barman had already excused his companions and walked towards me. “I will escort you,” he said, his hand gesturing at the back door furtively. “Please hurry.”

I hesitated for a bit before heading for the assigned direction, where a closed wooden door led to what I supposed was the back alley. I opened the door and the barman followed. A dreadful feeling permeated me in the form of a sudden mute and sly looks in my peripheral vision, and then the door was shut again.

“This way.”

We paced for a while, twisting and turning until we reached a dimly lit clearing. A carriage stood in the dark, behind a tall figure also dressed in black. Maybe it was my imagination, but I could see a light smile despite not seeing anything but their silhouettes.

Then the figure stepped into the light, a young woman wearing a black silk gown that almost extended to the ground. Her hands were covered by gloves of the same material, and on top of her head was a wide-brimmed hat. A thin netted veil draped over her face, save the red pair of lips that curled into an assuring smile just like what I imagined.

“Missus Lilith, I bring you Missus Lucy.”

"Very well, Frederick." Her voice was airy. *Light as a feather*. And oddly familiar. "You may dismiss. Your payment should have arrived by now."

"Thank you, Missus." Frederick turned back the way we went.

"We must make haste, Lucy. Time is ticking." The woman called. "You can sit inside the car. Make sure to hold onto anything you can find."



There were two directions to go from the clearing: Frederick's route back to town and the carriage's bumpy road deep into the forest. It seemed like we were going uphill, *seemed like*, because I couldn't make out a thing outside. A hand lantern hung above my head, its light swaying back and forth rhythmically. A similar one appeared before the woman's field of vision as well.

For a moment the atmosphere was quite unsettling. *This woman is fully protected*, I didn't dare utter a sound. It felt as if her black outfit had absorbed all my will to talk. I fidgeted in my seat in search of an appropriate ice-breaking line, but my head was void at the time.

"If I recall correctly, the other new girl was as shy as you." Lilith spoke.

I startled. She chuckled. "I am glad you haven't lost your consciousness. You barely said a word since our first conversation on the phone."

Now I was surprised. "You were the headmistress?" The phone call was short and was a little over a month ago, so her voice didn't stand out much.

"No, I am just part of the alumni," Lilith said. "I am in charge of new registrations. Though it was hardly my main job, since we do not accept as many students as other places do."

Curiosity started to invade me. "Then are there two of us this time?"

"Yes." Her reply was brief. "Alice is escorting the other student right now."

"Did you give her a different instruction?"

"Yes. The place should be on the other side of town."

"Why do you have to hide from the townsfolk, though?"

I shouldn't have asked that question.

Lilith fell silent. For a minute the only sound heard was horseshoes clashing with pebbles echoing through layers of leaves. The atmosphere which was pretty lively just now disappeared and was replaced by yet another void. I stumbled to spark conversation. "I'm sorry, Missus Lilith, I didn't mean--"

"It is okay. And call me Lily, sweetie." There was that airy voice again. "It is true that I prefer formal talk, but that

is just the way I was taught.” I was amazed by her talkative nature. I assumed her attire was just to take precautions, given that my impression of a shady boarding school was correct. Still a part of her soft voice had surrounded me in a cloud of comfort.

“I reckon I have to get to the main point,” Lily said. “We’re not there yet, but I welcome you to Madeleine boarding school. Part of the overseeing Council of Female Etiquette, our school attempts to create suitable environments as well as comfortable programs for adolescent girls and young women to practice any kind of subject they wish to pursue as a career, or simply any daily task us girls are assigned to. Our faculty and resources will provide you with as much material as possible. You can also interact with other personnel as well as students to exchange information. Though we do not have many people here, we will do our best to support you.” She turned and smiled at me, and I felt kind of relieved. “I am fortunate to not repeat these lines so often, they sound so cringy. Feel free to ask any question, sweetie, I will try to cover as many as my position would allow.”

“Okay. Why are you acting on behalf of the headmistress?”

“Nice question. The headmistress and her subordinates are taking a break at the moment, so naturally I would take over her as I am practically the oldest member of the alumni.”

“Taking a break?”

She paused before answering my question. “Sorry, but their whereabouts are unknown. I took the phrase out of the headmistress’s final note.”

“You don’t even know where they are?”

“I am afraid so. For now I and Alice are trying to cover all of the school’s programs, but technically we are in such a bind you might not find us at times, I apologize. Thankfully this place does not hold too many students.”

“How many, then?”

“Five, including you two.” She laughed. “Most of the graduates already moved away; only I and Alice stayed. We have spent seven years here, ever since we were seventeen ourselves. The other three, well, Monica is in the midst of completing her program, while Rachel and Emma are still progressing.”

That makes seven of us. A small number for a boarding school, but not so small if I were to live with. In fact I was content with it.

“I must apologize that if the faculty was with us, then you would receive the best amount of support. But right now we are operating on our own two feet, so I must ask you to rely on whatever resources we have left here.” Lily looked at me, her eyes sparkling through the veil. “Fortunately the girls are good-natured. Well, they do have their own misbehavior, but I guess those can be coped with.

I am sure you would find yourself acquainted with the place in due time.”

A full moon appeared through a leaf hole above us, illuminating the outside path for a little while.

“This is one of the side routes to reach the mansion.” Lily sensed me looking around. Well, apparently this was a side path, considering the steep incline we were traversing. “The main route was temporarily closed due to a recent landslide, and nobody in town bothered to repair it. Anyway, back to topic.” I noticed that Lily’s way of speech was clear and precise, that of a maiden brought up and nurtured in a good-mannered environment.

“I guess you are still not familiar with how things work out here,” she continued. “We do have a special set of rules that every new member must comply. Have you a note and pencil with you, sweetie?”

“I’ll take it out.” I fumbled the inside of my long-sleeved coat and produced a worn pocket notebook; I’d been keeping it ever since I found out I had a thing with taking notes. Its inside was scribbled with minute lines and charts and pictures and maps of practically anything I felt like needed to be memorized, though in fact I didn’t need to.

“Alright,” Lily said. “First, punctuality. That is one quality every person, let alone us maidens, must possess and master. There are a few fixations in our timetable, although that of each student is different. The first three being a gathering for breakfast, lunch, dinner, at seven,

thirteen and nineteen, respectively. You are to show up at our dining hall prior to or at exactly that time. Are you following, Lucy, sweetie?”

“Meals at seven, thirteen and nineteen. I get it.” I said.

“Excellent. Next is the curfew. You are to resort inside your assigned bedroom from twenty-two to next morning’s six. Of course, I and Alice are exempt from this rule, because we are alumni and right now, we have to check for security every day. There are a few security members from the faculty as well, and they would do the job for us were they present.”

“So we must stay inside our rooms during the whole time, even if there’s something happening outside?”

“Usually that is the safest option, but, still, there are exceptions, which we will inform you in due time. Besides, we will be going on patrol at random times during your curfew, so do not attempt anything, okay?” She giggled. “Our beloved Rachel once waited for me to step in her bedroom to scare me with a lizard she caught somewhere and sneak out, but unfortunately I was not a scaredy-cat.”

I had a feeling I would be better off asking Rachel about the consequences. “I understand,” was what I said instead. “Is this all?”

“There is one more period, though,” Lily answered with a hint of warning. “I want you to stay in your room from seventeen to eighteen, also.”

“Is it such a strange time to do that?” I was skeptical.

"I figured you would say that," she said. "And yes, it is. But you need not know the reason, as, after all, this is as far as I can say without violating my authority. Just do as I say, okay, sweetie?"

My mind was swarming with a few theories of what could occur that prevented Lily from publicizing it, but they turned out to be ridiculous and unrealistic, so I complied. *Or are they?* I shuddered. There must be something so strange that they had to confine us to safety at that time.

"Oh my, we must hurry, look at you shivering like that," Lily said. "Perhaps you must be hungry, so I have prepared something that is awaiting your arrival at the mansion--"

"But you just said dinner starts at nineteen," I exclaimed.

"True, but it does not end until one hour has passed," she replied. "If we can make it before twenty strikes, then you can have your dinner. Which I can, after all. We have passed the half-mark and it has not been twenty minutes yet since I first met you at the clearing.

"Now, second, manners. We expect every student that had practiced in this school to be diligent--" she recited, "resourceful, modest, clean and kind-hearted. Only when we are helpful to each other to strive forward do we actually develop further. I do not expect you to always be so, but try to be so whenever such qualities are needed. As I have said, the girls do have some misbehavior, but they do no harm.

However, such violations that are harmful to others are not tolerated."

"What would happen in case there is one?"

"We have a set of corresponding punishments, but I had better not tell you here and now, on your first day." Lily chuckled.

By now my anxiety had completely gone. Lily's initial appearance had taken such a strong impression in me, one about those frightening villains, *witches*, that I'd heard of in fairy tales I used to read. But it seemed that her personality was that of the opposite: she looked like someone who could casually crack a joke to liven things up, *a class clown*, during times of trouble. Also, I could sense from her an aura of a know-it-all; after all, her being so well-informed about this place and ability to take charge of the whole school suggested it. I had a feeling that she would be a great help to me during my days to come.

"Alright," I said. "How about the third rule?"

"I guess we would have to wait until tomorrow." Lily replied. "The place has already appeared before us."